

Message Text

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 ATHENS 5996

E.O. 11652: GDS

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SUBJECT: PARLIAMENT ADOPTS NEW ELECTORAL LAW

1. SUMMARY. ALTHOUGH PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS ARE NOT SCHEDULED TO TAKE PLACE IN GREECE UNTIL NOVEMBER 1978, THE ELECTORAL LAW WHICH GOVERN THESE ELECTIONS HAS BEEN THE SUBJECT OF CONSIDERABLE DISCUSSION IN RECENT MONTHS. IN RESPONSE TO THIS THE GOVERNMENT INTRODUCED A NEW DRAFT LAW EARLIER THIS MONTH WHICH WAS ADOPTED BY THE PARLIAMENT ON JUNE 15. THE LAW IS ESSENTIALLY THE SAME AS THE 1974 ELECTORAL LAW PROVIDING FOR A SYSTEM OF REINFORCED PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION UNDER WHICH PRIME MINISTER CARAMANLIS' PARTY WON AN OVERWHELMING MAJORITY OF SEATS IN THE PARLIAMENT. HOWEVER, THE NEW LAW INCLUDES SEVERAL IMPORTANT AMENDMENTS, ONE OF WHICH IN PARTICULAR, THE SO-CALLED "PLUS ONE" PROVISION, COULD FAVOR THE OPPOSITION PARTIES. THE LAW ALSO REDUCES THE VOTING AGE FROM 21 TO 20. END SUMMARY

2. GERYMANDER IS ONE OF THE FEW WORDS IN OUR POLITICAL GLOSSARY WHICH IS NOT GREEK IN ORIGIN. NEVERTHELESS, OVER THE YEARS NATIONAL ELECTION PROCEDURES IN GREECE HAVE BEEN MOLDED
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TO FIT NARROW PURPOSES, A PROCESS WHOSE HEAT HELPED FATIGUE RATHER THAN ANNEAL THE LEGITIMACY OF GREEK POLITICAL SYSTEMS. THE COUNTRY HAS LACKED AN ELECTION PROCEDURE WHICH WAS GENERALLY ACCEPTED AS LEGITIMATE, CONSISTENT AND FAIR.

3. NATIONAL PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS ARE NOT CONSTITUTIONALLY REQUIRED IN GREECE UNTIL THE MANDATE OF THE PRESENT PARLIAMENT

EXPIRES ON NOVEMBER 17, 1978. ELECTIONS MUST THEN BE HELD WITHIN THIRTY DAYS. MOREOVER, DESPITE PERIODIC RUMORS TO THE CONTRARY, CARMANLIS HAS GIVEN NO SIGN THAT HE INTENDS TO HAVE THE PARLIAMENT PROPRGUED IN ORDER TO SEEK A TEST OF HIS POPULARITY AT THE POLLS IN THE NEAR FUTURE. NEVERTHELESS, OVER THE PAST SEVERAL MONTHS THERE HAS BEEN CONSIDERABLE PUBLIC DISCUSSION OVER THE ELECTION LAW WHICH WILL GOVERN THE NEXT NATIONAL ELECTIONS, AND TO NO ONE'S SURPRISE EARLIER THIS MONTH THE GOVERNMENT INTRODUCED A DRAFT ELECTORAL LAW WHICH WAS DEBATED AND VOTED UPON ON A PRIORITY BASIS. THE NEW LAW WAS ADOPTED ON JUNE 15.

4. THE PRINCIPAL PROVISIONS OF THE NEW LAW ARE:

--MAINTENANCE OF THE REINFORCED PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION SYSTEM USED IN THE NOVEMBER 1974 ELECTION. THE REINFORCED PROPORTIONAL SYSTEM, AS PRACTICED IN GREECE, FAVORS LARGE PARTIES AND

WITH THAT, THE CONSERVATIVE FORCES OF THE NATION, WHO ARE THE LARGEST SINGLE BLOC IN THE COUNTRY.

--ADAPTATION OF THE SO-CALLED "PLUS ONE" REFINEMENT OF THE REINFORCED PROPORTIONAL SYSTEM. THE "PLUS ONE" SYSTEM REDUCES SOMEWHAT THE NUMBER OF VOTES REQUIRED FOR A CANDIDATE TO BE ELECTED IN THE FIRST DISTRIBUTION OF SEATS. (INSTEAD OF DIVIDING THE TOTAL VOTES IN AN ELECTORAL DISTRICT BY THE NUMBER OF SEATS IN THAT DISTRICT TO DETERMINE THE

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NUMBER OF VOTES REQUIRED TO BE ELECTED--WHAT THE GREEKS CALL "THE ELECTORAL MEASURE"--YOU DIVIDE BY THE NUMBER OF SEATS PLUS ONE.) ITS USE, THEREFORE, GIVES A SLIGHT BOOST TO SMALLER PARTIES BUT FALLS SHORT OF THEIR PREFERENCE FOR THE SIMPLE PROPORTIONAL SYSTEM.

--MAINTENANCE OF THE REQUIREMENT IN THE 1974 LAW THAT, OTHER THAN THE FIRST TWO PARTIES, AN OTHER SINGLE PARTY MUST RECEIVE AT LEAST 17 PERCENT OF THE NATIONAL VOTE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE SECOND ROUND DISTRIBUTION OF SEATS. THE LAW ALSO RETAINS THE PROVISION OF THE 1974 LAW UNDER WHICH TWO-PARTY COALITIONS MUST RECEIVE 25 PERCENT AND COALITIONS OF THREE OR MORE PARTIES THIRTY PERCENT OF THE VOTE IN ORDER TO PARTICIPATE IN THE SECOND ROUND DISTRIBUTION OF SEATS.

--LOWERING OF THE MINIMUM VOTING AGE FROM 21 TO 20.

5. THE LAW MET SOME BUT CERTAINLY NOT ALL THE DEMANDS OF THE VARIOUS OPPOSITION PARTIES:

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--ADOPTION OF THE "PLUS ONE" REFINEMENT WAS DEMANDED
BY THE UNION OF THE DEMOCRATIC CENTER (UDC) WHICH SEEMS
CONVINCED THAT IT WILL BE THE BENEFICIARY OF THE CHANGE, IF
IT SHOULD AGAIN RUN SECOND IN THE COMING ELECTIONS.

--THE USE OF THE 17 PERCENT FIGURE FOR PARTICIPATION IN THE
SECOND ROUND REJECTS POSITIONS TAKEN BY BOTH PASOK AND THE
UDC WHICH WANTED THE FIGURE LOWERED TO 15 PERCENT. THAT THESE
TWO PARTIES SHOULD HAVE SOUGHT THIS CHANGE REFLECTS, IN
OUR VIEW, THEIR LACK OF CONFIDENCE IN THEIR ABILITY TO POLL
MUCH MORE. IT IS ALSO NOTEWORTHY THAT THE "PLUS ONE" SYSTEM
WILL ONLY HAVE A SIGNIFICANT IMPACT IF THE SECOND LARGEST PARTY
SHOULD SUBSTANTIALLY CLOSE THE GAP BETWEEN IT AND THE NEW
DEMOCRACY--UNDER THE "PLUS ONE" SYSTEM ND WOULD HAVE WON 209
SEATS IN 1974 INSTEAD OF THE 220 IT DID. (THUS, CONFRONTED
WITH SOME UNHAPPINESS IN NEW DEMOCRACY RANKS OVER THE "PLUS
ONE" SYSTEM, CARAMANLIS MET WITH THE PARTY'S PARLIAMENTARY
GROUP AND REASSURED THEM THAT ALTHOUGH THE PARTY MIGHT LOSE A
FEW SEATS, IT WOULD STILL RETAIN A LARGE MAJORITY.)

--THE GOVERNMENT TOTALLY REJECTED THE CALL FROM THE
SAML PARTIES TO ADOPT A SIMPLE PROPORTIONAL SYSTEM. THE
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COMMUNISTS, AND THE OTHERS, COMPLAINED LOUDLY ABOUT THIS REJECTION.
BUT THE "PLUS ONE" SYSTME WILL ENABLE AT LEAST SOME OF THE SMALL

PARTIES TO SURVIVE, INCLUDING, OF COURSE, THE COMMUNIST PARTY OF THE EXTERIOR. IT ALSO ASSURES, OTHER THINGS BEING EQUAL, THAT CONSTANTINE MITSOTAKIS WILL BE ABLE TO BE ELECTED ON CRETE. SMALL PARTIES SUCH AS THE COMMUNIST PARTY OF THE INTERIOR, THE UNITED DEMOCRATIC LEFT (EDA), SOCIALIST INITIATIVE, THE CHRISTIAN DEMOCRATS AND SOCIALIST PATH (THE LATTER TWO OF WHICH ARE NOT AT PRESENT REPRESENTED IN PARLIAMENT) REMAIN UNDER A GREAT DEAL OF PRESSURE TO UNITE WITH OTHERS IF THEY HOPE TO ELECT ANYBODY IN THE NEXT ELECTIONS. INDEED, THERE HAVE ALREADY BEEN SOME NOT VERY FRUITFUL DISCUSSIONS AMONG THESE GROUPS LOOKING TO THAT END OR AT LEAST TOWARD SOME KIND OF ELECTORAL COOPERATION.

--THE GOVERNMENT GAVE SCANT SATISFACTION TO THE DEMAND FROM THE ENTIRE OPPOSITION THAT THE VOTING AGE BE LOWERED TO 18. THE GENERAL THEORY HERE IS THAT A LOWERING OF THE VOTING AGE WOULD PRODUCE MORE VOTES FOR THE LEFT, ASSUMING THE NEW VOTERS CAN GET REGISTERED IN TIME. (CARAMANLIS WAS REPORTED AS SAYING THAT LOWERING THE AGE TO 20 WOULD MEAN SOME 150,000 MORE VOTERS, OF WHOM, HE CLAIMED, 50,000 WOULD VOTE FOR ND.)

6. THE OPPOSITION PARTIES ALSO MADE A BIG ISSUE OVER THE RIGHT TO VOTE BY GREEKS OVERSEAS-- PRIMARILY WORKERS IN GERMANY AND MERCHANT SEAMEN. CARAMANLIS PROMISED THAT A SPECIAL COMMITTEE WOULD BE ESTABLISHED TO EXAMINE THIS QUESTION.

7. PASSAGE OF THE ELECTORAL LAW INEVITABLY LED TO RENEWED SPECULATION ABOUT EARLY ELECTION. THE DAY AFTER ITS ADOPTION, ON JUNE 16, A "GOVERNMENT SOURCE" STATED THAT THE GOVERNMENT HAD NO INTENTION OF SPEEDING UP THE DATE ON WHICH THE NEXT ELECTIONS WILL BE HELD. HE RECALLED IN THIS CONNECTION A STATEMENT OF JUNE 4 BY PRIME MINISTER CARAMANLIS WHO HAD SAID "THE TERM OF THE CONFIDENTIAL

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PRESENT PARLIAMENT ENDS--AND SHOULD END--IN NOVEMBER 1978." ON JUNE 25, SPEAKING TO THE ND PARLIAMENTARY GROUP, CARAMANLIS HIMSELF REITERATED THAT "WE ARE STILL A LONG WAY FROM ELECTIONS." DESPITE THESE STATEMENTS, HOWEVER, FEW OBSERVERS EXCLUDE THE POSSIBILITY THERE WILL BE ELECTIONS BEFORE NOVEMBER 1978, SOME CLAIMING THEY WILL BE HELD IN THE SPRING OF 1978.

8. COMMENT: PRIME MINISTER CARAMANLIS AND PRINCIPAL OPPOSITION LEADER MAVROS BOTH AGREE THAT ANY GREEK ELECTORAL LAW MUST PERMIT THE PRINCIPAL POLITICAL TENDENCIES IN THE COUNTRY TO BE REPRESENTED IN PARLIAMENT WHILE AT THE SAME TIME MAKING IT POSSIBLE FOR A STRONG, STABLE GOVERNMENT TO BE FORMED. FOR THIS REASON THEY BOTH OPPOSE THE SIMPLE PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION SYSTEM. BUT, MORE GENERALLY, ELECTORAL LAWS HERE HAVE BEEN TRADITIONALLY DESIGNED TO MEET TWO CONCERNS: THE FIRST FUNCTIONAL AND THE OTHER POLITICAL. IN A COUNTRY WHERE THERE IS AN EXTRAORDINARY TENDENCY TO SCHISMS, MOST SENIOR POLITICIANS

WANT TO DISCOURAGE THIS PRACTICE--WHICH AT BEST MAKES IT
DIFFICULT TO FORM A GOVERNMENT MAJORITY AND AT WORST INCREASES
INSTABILITY. IN THE PAST, ELECTORAL LAWS HAVE ALSO BEEN SHAPED
QUITE CONSCIOUSLY TO STRENGTHEN THE GREEK RIGHT AND CENTER
AT THE EXPENSE OF THE LEFT. THE NEW LAW COULD GIVE THE LEFT
A BIT MORE OF A CHANCE BUT DOES NOT SEEM TO ALTER THE PREVIOUS
BIAS SUBSTANTIALY.
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